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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PORT AU PRINCE 001566

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO UNDER SECRETARY BURNS' PARTY IN NEW YORK

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SUBJECT: SENATORS PITCH ELECTORAL "PAUSE" AND EXTENSION OF
TERMS WHILE OPPOSITION BEGINS TO EMERGE IN POLITICAL
PARTIES; PREVAL REMAINS FIRM

REF: PORT AU PRINCE 1546

Classified By: Ambassador Janet A. Sanderson, reason 1.5(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Ambassadors from the US, Brazil, Canada and France met with the President of the Senate and his colleagues to discuss his proposal for an "electoral pause" which would put Haiti's electoral calendar on hold while allowing for constitutional reform. Lambert argued that the proposal would end the heavy burden of elections every two years and bring stability to political institutions, while lifting a heavy financial burden. My colleagues and I pushed back hard, arguing that the proposal was destabilizing and could undermine Haiti's nascent democracy. At the end of the meeting, Lambert acknowledged that the Parliament would also have to consider the alternative: a return to the electoral calendar. President Preval, however, remains strongly committed to the program. He told me that he believes it to be critical to Haiti's future and he refused to be swayed by suggestions that his proposal might call into question the legitimacy of his own government. As a result, the elections proposal remains on the table, and we expect Preval will continue to try to convince the international community that it is workable and necessary. . Lambert, for his part, appears to have taken on board some of our concerns. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Senate President Joseph Lambert convoked the ambassadors of the "election quartet" (US, Brazil, Canada and France) the afternoon of September 24 to present formally the proposal for an "electoral pause" which would put Haiti's electoral calendar on hold while allowing for an overhaul of the country's unwieldy constitution. The proposal would also give all senators a 6 year mandate, whether they had been elected to one or not. (Currently, terms are staggered with a third of the Senate having terms of two, four or six years respectively.) Lambert, accompanied by the executive board of the Senate, political allies from his home region of Jacmel and other interested senators, argued that the constitutionally-mandated electoral calendar places an enormously expensive burden on Haiti's fragile democracy. As he did in our bilateral meeting (reftel), he said that the busy electoral calendar was divisive and difficult to manage. He contended that stability was essential to Haiti's ability to address the key challenges of institutional development, building capacity within the political system to deal with Haiti's many problems, particularly those which are economic in nature, and instilling confidence among the Haitian people. Lastly, he argued that constitutional reform was key to Haiti's future and would head off "dictators."

13. (C) My colleagues and I pushed back hard. While acknowledging the many problems inherent in the 1987 constitution, we contended that freezing the electoral calendar would undermine the democratic gains made in the past two years. It could call into question the legitimacy not only of the Preval government but also of the Parliament itself. Undertaking constitutional reform at this point was risky and likely divisive -- and not inherently necessary to warding off dictators. That role should fall to strong political institutions and populations invested in, and confident of, the democratic political process. There was, we remarked, no obvious link between extended senate mandates and constitutional reform. We also took note of the optics of such a step; at a time when the country is attempting to encourage investment, changing the rules of the game politically would have a negative influence on possible investors. Such a drastic step, we suggested, would demand the strong support and engagement of the political classes as well as the Haitian people; as of yet, we saw no evidence of a grand political coalition developing to support this proposal. Lastly, we rebuffed the complaints of Lambert's colleagues that the elections were too expensive to hold, noting the continued strong support, both political and financial, of the international community for the electoral process.

14. (C) Lambert, who is a shrewd political animal, deflected some of more self-serving colleagues. He said that he would mull over our points; as friends of Haiti our views were critical in his thinking. He noted that consultations with the political parties are ongoing and would continue for some time. (Also an issue of concern that we raised, noting that a protracted consultation process was in of itself disruptive.) He stated that he would consider a fall back position of

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returning to the electoral calendar, with Senate elections on tap first, and would revisit the issue of the CEP's legal status. The unanimity of opinion on the proposal among the ambassadors appeared to surprise Lambert, but he welcomed the exchange.

15. (C) In the meantime, opposition to this proposal is mounting within the political parties. Representatives of Fusion, terming themselves as "true democrats", decried the proposal at length in a conversation last night and claimed it would open the door for abuse of the political process. The OPL and Union parties reportedly have also rejected the proposal. Human rights activist Yanick Lahens was equally unhappy, although she acknowledged that the country had to address the flawed constitution sooner rather than later. Interestingly enough, although Haiti's political class is aware of the idea of an "electoral pause", and although the idea is just beginning to percolate into the press, it has yet to spark a broad national discussion.

16. (C) Subsequent to the drafting of above, I spent 20 minutes with Preval as he prepared to depart for New York. He remains strongly committed to the proposal, calling it essential to Haiti's future, and sought our support and understanding. Preval, who had been briefed on our meeting at Parliament, expressed disappointment with the preliminary reaction of the international community. He suggested that the parliamentarians focused on the issue most important to them: the extension of the senatorial mandate. The real issue is the constitution, the president said. Haiti simply cannot afford, either financially or politically, to maintain the electoral schedule laid out in the constitution. The rolling schedule of elections was dysfunctional, expensive, and, by definition, destabilizing. He expected no personal gain from this proposal, he would not stay on past the end of his term. But the country could ill afford to keep having elections every two years. That cycle neither fostered democracy nor institution building; instead, it keep political parties, parliament and the population in a state of perpetual electoral fever. Haiti has democratically

elected leaders now; the democratic process is well and truly launched here. But, the president argued, its development and reinforcement is symtied by the constitution, a document which he reminded me is not manna from heaven.

17. (C) Comment. Based on our conversations over the past few days, Lambert appears to inching away from the election pause proposal. The president, however, remains strongly attached to it. He reiterated to me that he will have a political consensus to support the revision of the constitution and electoral moritorium, although that contention is not yet borne out by available evidence. Preval sees this proposal as "his" legacy (effectively giving lie to his comment that this was really a Lambert initaitive) and will be hard to shake from his conviction that putting elections on hold while a new consitution is sorted out will actually enhance Haitian stability. Our meeting with Lambert led the Election Quartet to believe that the proposal would die a slow death. Preval is committed to seeing that doesn't happen, however, and he is a stubborn man with a mission. We should expect this idea will continue to come at us in various forms for some time as the president searches for ways to bring the international community into the Haitian political debate on his side.
SANDERSON